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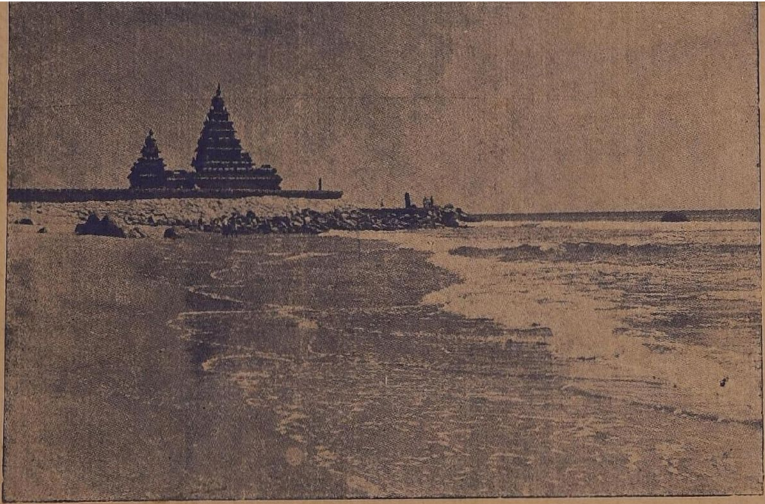

MAMALLAPURAM

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(A GUIDE)

BY

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Mamallapuram

India abounds in artistic and religious monuments, but Mamallapuram is exceptional. Its art, which came into being early in the eighth century A. D., sums up the architectural and sculptural developments of the previous centuries and foreshadows later progress. It has, thus, been both a fruition and a beginning. Its history began in the first centuries of the Christian era as a port and under the Pallava kings it also became a great centre of piety and art. Many of its monuments were under the sand when the British, who settled down in Madras in 1639, went to the site, enthusiastically puzzled over them, dug them out and laid the foundations of the considerable modern Mamallapuram studies.

An old tradition that a few temples are submerged in the sea just off Mamallapuram, which is the basis for the British name of "Seven Pagodas" for the site, has not yet been tested.

The modern visitor travels to Mamallapuram, 32 miles south of Madras on the coast, by choice of two roads. The coastal highway is perhaps the more agreeable, though the other takes him past Tirupporur, where there is an ancient temple which has Pallava affiliations and which is fronted by a beautiful tank (as large sheets of water are called in South India). In the first few miles of this coastal road, near Madras, the traveller finds many modern factories. If he should travel a little beyond Mamallapuram, he will come to an atomic power station under construction.

The road traverses a typical South Indian landscape, made up mainly of coconut and palm trees, small shrines, little tanks, and village tea stalls, their radio sets blaring film music. It takes him past Covelong, where Lord Clive once fought, Tiruvadandai, where there is a lovely Chola temple set in a grove of trees, and Saluvankuppam which, in the olden days, was a part of Mamallapuram, but which is now a sandy waste with two "cave" temples.

The modern traveller journeys to Mamallapuram from Madras in about an hour in a fast car. In the last century the journey was made by the Buckingham Canal, often by moonlight. Bishop Heber and Edward Lear, the author of "nonsense" limericks, were among those who made this journey.

Mamallapuram began its existence as a port some two thousand years ago. In the seventh century A.D., the Pallava kings of Kanchipuram, about forty miles to the east, developed it greatly. It continued as a harbour, and history records at least two Pallava armadas that set forth from it to conquer Ceylon. What are unrecorded are countless emigrant ships which carried Hindu culture and civilization to what are now Indonesia and Indo-China.

The Pallavas appear in south Indian history about 275 A.D. as ruling from Kanchipuram. Their origins are disputed, whether they were foreigners (probably from Persia) or originated in the Deccan or belonged to the north Tamil country. They ruled from

Kanchipuram from their first days and their kingdom included the south Andhra land, the Krishna valley, for many centures. The Buddhist art of this area influenced their own profoundly.

In the reign of Mahendravarman I (600-630 A.D.) began a war with the Chalukyas of Badami that lasted about two centuries and enfeebled both dynasties. A consequence was that the Pallavas, now almost wholly a Tamil power, looked for territory to the south. At various times they conquered the Tamil country as far south as the river Cauvery. But this involved them in frequent wars with the Pandyas of Madurai.

These long-drawn-out wars, however, seldom hampered artistic and other cultural activities. The fighting was mostly confined to the kings and their armies. The three dynasties, the Pallavas, the Badami Chalukyas and the Pandyas, created much excellent religious art.

Mamallapuram enters Pallava annals in

the reign of the first Mahendravarman. His father, Simhavishnu (580-600 A.D.) is the earliest Pallava of whom anything definite is known. Mahendravarman was a remarkable personality, one of the most striking in the history of ancient India. He was a dramatist, a musician, an artist, and above all, one keenly interested in spiritual problems. He created rock architecture in south India. This art was about a thousand years old in north and western India when Mahendravarman's masons began chiselling in the hills in the Tamil country. Originally a Jain, he became a Hindu under the impulse of a great saint, Appar.

Mahendra's son, Narasimhavarman I (630-668) is intimately associated with Mamallapuram. It is his surname, "Mamalla" or the *"great wrestler", that was given to the port* town, Mamallapuram, which later became Mahabalipuram, really a misnomer. (There are many other misnomers of nomenclature here). Mamalla was a great warrior. Continuing the Chalukyan enmity he had inherited from his

father, he captured Vatapi, the enemy capital in 642 A.D. and occupied many parts of that kingdom for at least thirteen years. Just before this expedition famous in epigraphical annals, left Kanchipuram, a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, Huen-tsang, paid a visit to the Pallava capital.

Mamalla's son and successor, the first Paramesvaravarman (668-700) felt the force of Chalukyan vengeance. He had to abandon his capital, but recovered it.

The golden age of the Pallavas followed in the reign of the second Narasimhavarman (700-728). This king was as notable as his ancestor, the first Mahendravarman. He was a religious aesthete. Undisturbed by wars' alarms most of his reign, he experimened in religious art. He caused to be excavated "cave" temples, monoliths and structural temples at Mamallapuram, besides two rock shrines at Saluvankuppam, four miles north of Mamallapuram. But his finest achievement is the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram. His father had built a structural temple at Kuram, near Kanchi, and perhaps renovated another at

Tiruvadigai, in South Arcot district. But it is with the second Narasimhavarman, also called Rajasimha, that the tradition of structural temples, the most distinctive aspect south Indian religious art, begins.

Epigraphs show that all the monuments at Mamallapuram should be ascribed to Rajasimha.

The Pallava dynasty ended late in the ninth century A.D., but its supplanters, the Cholas, continued its artistic traditions in an imperial spirit. The great temples of Tanjore and Gangaikondacholapuram, built in the eleventh century, mark the zenith of religious architecture in the south.

Under the Cholas, Mamallapuram continued to prosper. Some of the emperors visited it and made benefactions to its temples, as recorded in inscriptions. These epigraphs show incidentally that there was a vigorous local self-government in this region in the middle ages.

The Vijayanagar emperors, bulwarks of

Hinduism, continued the royal patronage. But Mamallapuram was badly neglected when their rule came to an end. When the British came to the site late in the eighteenth century, they found it deserted and many of the monuments partly or wholly under sand. They did much to restore them before the Archaeological Survey of India appeared on the scene. The first attempt at arranging the monuments in a chronological order was made by James Fergusson in the 1840's. Indian scholars have been active in Mamallapuram studies in recent years.

The art of Mamallapuram:

Mamallapuram appeals to varieties of people. Its picturesque location on the coast, with one of the monuments, the Shore Temple, directly buffetted by the waves, appeals to the imagination. The prospect of the sea nearby flowing over some monuments, a belief once strongly held and the subject of Robert Southey's epic, "The Curse of Kehama" in the last century, is intriguing. Some observers have noticed a "Chinese look." in some

of the monuments.

To the well informed tourist, Mamallapuram is important in the history of Indian and south-east Asian art. To the aesthete the graceful Pallava sculptures are of absorbing interest. All this explains why a large number of tourists have been visiting Mamallapuram.

Mamallapuram art has been influenced by three traditions. The first is indigenous. Tamil literature of the early Christian centuries preserves descriptions of attractive contemporary architecture and sculpture. The second is the art of the Amaravathi school, particularly influential in sculpture. The third, a distant one, is that of Gupta art which filled with its fragrance all India from about the fourth to the sixth centuries.

The monuments of Mamallapuram are of four kinds. They are "cave" temples, "cut out" temples, bas reliefs in the open air and structural temples. The second and the third are unique to Mamallapuram. There is nothing like them elsewhere in all the broad

range of Indian art. The Mamallapuram "cave" temples are among the earliest of their kind in southern India. So are the structural temples. Hence the supreme importance of Mamallapuram in art history. Contemporary dynasties like the Muttarayaiyas excavated a few shrines near Pudukottah.

Cave temples

The first "cave" shrines in India were excavated by emperor Asoka and his grandson, Dasaratha, near Gaya, in Bihar. This was about a thousand years before the Mamallapuram "cave" temples came into being. Rock architecture is naturally conditioned by the nature of the rock excavated into. The rock is hard granite at Mamallapuram.

One of the earliest temples to be excavated in the Tamil country is at Mandagapattu. Its creator, the first Mahendravarman, exults in having avoided the use of materials like brick, timber, metal and mortar. This suggests that earlier shrines in south India, of which the local literatures say there were many, were made of

these materials and these have all disappeared in time. Mahendravarman excavated many other shrines of this type in his kingdom.

These temples are pillared halls with the cella or cellas excavated in the back wall. These halls, called "mandapas" in Tamil, face the east or the west Most halls are divided into two sections by an intermediate row of pillars and pilasters. Figure sculptures are scanty, but invariably two door-keepers' called "dvarapalakas", guard the shrine. In some monuments these figures are carved on either side of the facade. Inscriptions are found in many monuments. There are nine principal rock temples at Mamallapuram, excavated on the east and west faces of the hill. They range from rather simple looking examples like the Dharmaraja mandapa to the ornate and well developed masterpieces like the Mahishamardhini, the Varaha and the Adivaraha.

Some Mamallapuram " Caves " carry superb sculptures. In the Mahishamardhini cave, there are two, on opposite walls, showing Lord Vishnu in His cosmic sleep, and Goddess Durga fighting the demon. The profound peace

depicted in the former, contemptuously indifferent to the menaces of two demons, is as striking as the warlike energy in the latter. In the Varaha excavation there are four sculptures. One of them, depicting the story of Bali, provides the only connection with the popular name of the site of all these monuments. In the Adivaraha temple (the only one of its kind under worship today) there are even more.

These shrines were mostly dedicated to Lord Siva. The object of worship appears to have been a panel of Somaskanda, which shows Siva and Parvathi with their child Skanda. One of the temples was dedicated to Goddess Durga, a popular divinity in Pallava times. Sculptures of Her are to be seen on many monuments. Another of these temples was devoted to the worship of Lord Siva, Lord Vishnu and Lord Subramanya together.

Monolithic temples

The "cave" temples have been made in the northern of the two hills to be found at Mamallapuram. The southern has been fashioned into

five "rathas". This name is another misnomer. They are really monolith temples "cut out" in many broad styles None of them is very big, and their ultimate effect is not so much that of architecture as that of sculpture. Two of them glow with figure sculptures, some of them of the very finest quality.

Of the four "rathas" in a row, the southernmost, named Dharmaraja ratha, is the most attractive, while its neighbour, the Bhima ratha, is the most striking. The Dharmaraja and Arjuna rathas (which lies third from the south) belong to the same style. A pyramid of storeys which become smaller as they approach the spire is superimposed on a square hall with pillars on all the four sides. This is the Dharmaraja ratha on plan. Its smaller version, the Arjuna ratha, differs in having a verandah in front of a closed cella. The towers of these two monuments are the progenitors of later types over Hindu temples in the greater part of south India.

Architecturally, thus, important, these two monuments, together with a third, at the nor-

thern end of the row, called the Draupadi ratha, carry some of the best sculptures in India Most depict divine personages, but it is believed that some of the Pallava kings are also shown The figure sculptures are charming and easy. They have a svelte grace. The sculptors brought to their task not only a good knowledge of human anatomy but also a high conception of human loveliness. The faces are heart shaped, the limbs elegantly slender, the dispositions unaffected. There are many masterpieces on the three storeys of the Dharmara a ratha. The Draupadi ratha takes the form of a hut still to be seen in some parts of India. Dedicated to Goddess Durga, it contains an image of Her in the cella.

The Bhima ratha, which is neighbour to the Dharmaraja ratha, and the Sahadeva ratha, which stands apart from the row, belong to another order of religious architecture. The former, a massive construction, has no sculptures on its walls. It is striking for its tower, which has been fashioned after an upturned

country cart. It is the model for the huge towers at entrances to Hindu temples, called "gopuras". The Sahadeva ratha's tower is in the "elephant-backed" style with a curving form. This kind of tower was frequently built over shrines in later times.

Near the Sahadeva ratha stands a majestic elephant, in front of the Draupadi ratha a lifelike lion and behind a recumbent bull, in Hindu mythology the vehicle of Lord Siva. All the eight monuments, the five rathas and the three animal sculptures, appear to have been carved out of a hillock which sloped down northwards. Its highest point must have been the Dharmaraja ratha's tower and its lowest the spire of the Draupadi ratha.

There are three other rathas elsewhere at Mamallapuram. The Ganesa ratha, a little to the north of the bigger hill, is a splendid monument. Practically no monument at Mamallapuram has been completed, but this one is an exception. Its style somewhat the same as that of the Bhima ratha, its superstructure merits study. It carries on its gables

a small representation of what was probably a contemporary tower which is of much interest. Originally dedicated to Lord Siva, this monument has now become a shrine to Lord Ganesa.

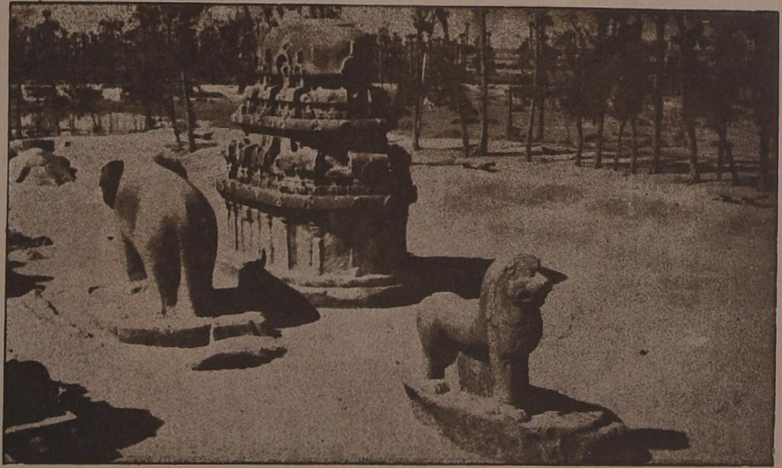
Near the Buckingham Canal, to the west of the township, there are three small rathas, two named Pidari and the third Valayankuttai. Near the lighthouse on the hill can be made out the beginnings of yet another ratha. Evidently the type appealed to the Pallava artists.

Bas Reliefs

If a traveller could spend only half an hour at Mamallapuram, he would be well advised to spend it studying the bas relief called "Arjuna's penance". As distinctively as the Kailasa temple or the paintings of Ajanta or the Taj Mahal, it is a pride of Indian art. On a rock surface facing the east with a fissure about its middle, have been carved about one hundred figures of divinities, celestials, human beings and animals. The centre of attraction is the fissure, towards which everybody and

The Varaha "cave" temple on the west face of the hill.
It contains four superb sculptures.

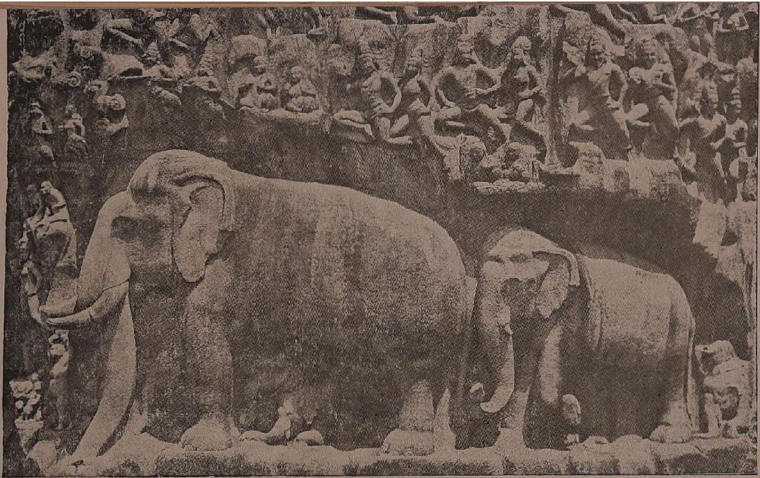
The five monoliths with a carved lion and an elephant. There is also a bull behind one of the monoliths and out of view in this picture.



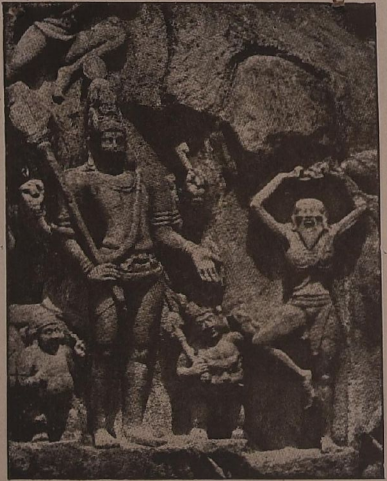
The Sahadeva ratha which stands apart. This picture shows the carved lion and elephant in its contiguity.

Lord Vishnu in His cosmic sleep. A famous sculptured panel on the southern wall of the Mahishamardhani cave, on the east face of the hill, just below the Light-house.

The stirring fight goddess Durga with the buffalo-faced demon.
Another famous sculpture of the same monument.

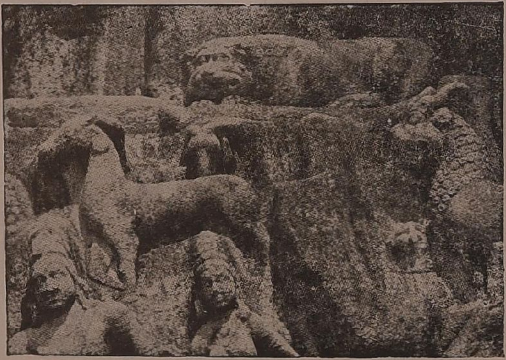


A scene from the famous bas relief, "Arjuna's penance", on the east face of the hill. In the bottom row elephants and their young stalk solemnly towards the fissure in the rock. Above are celestial beings effortlessly flying.



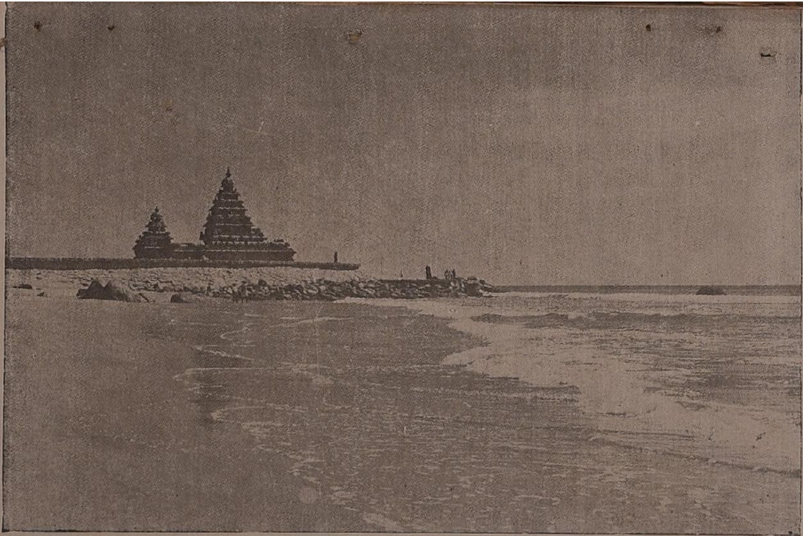
Another scene from the same masterpiece, to the south of the fissure, at the top. Lord Siva granting a weapon to Arjuna.

Dharmaraja Ratha.



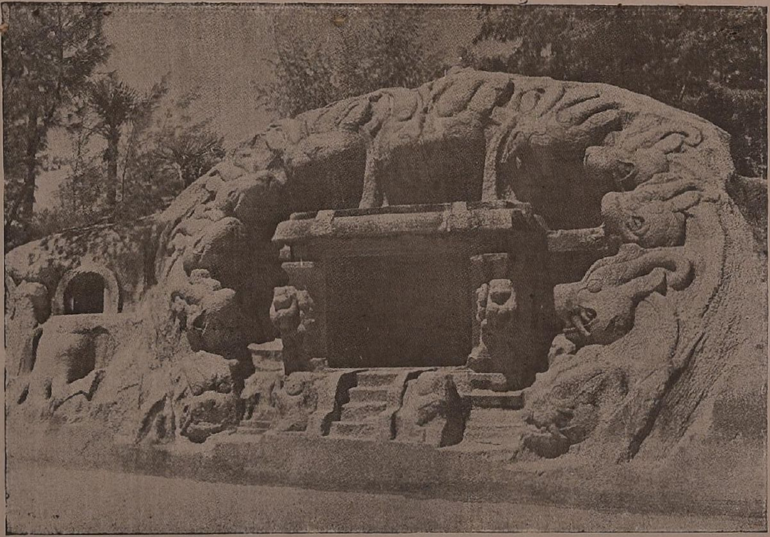
A lion sleeps while, below, goats look about.

A deer scratching itself with a hoof.



A distant view of the Shore Temple.

The Somaskanda panel in one of the shrines in the Shore Temple.



The so called "Tiger Cave" at Saluvankuppam.

A sculpture of Goddess Durga at saluvankuppam.

everything is turning. In the top row celestial personages are effortlessly flying towards the crevice. In lower portions some of the most majestic elephants Indian art has created are ambling towards the same destination. There are also a few lions, deer monkey and a cat (the feline providing unexpected humour).

In the southern section of the huge sculpture a drama is taking place. Near the top stands a majestic God. Nearby is an ascetic practising severe austerities, in this case standing on a toe. A little below an emaciated personage is seated near a little shrine of Lord Vishnu. Further below is a scene familiar until the other day on rivers bank in south Indian villages of people performing religious rites.

The grand question is what this sculpture represents. It does not depict serpent worship, as Fergusson suggested, for the king of serpents is himself in an act of worship. Two other conjectures hold the field, but learned opinion today is that the scene is that of Arjuna's penance, an incident in the epic, Mahabharatha.

Arjuna, the same hero after whom one of the five rathas has been named, wished to secure a weapon from Lord Siva for the impending war with his usurping cousins, the Kauravas. He performed severe penance, disdaining all temptations which were deliberately thrust in his way. As a final test, Lord Siva himself appeared as a hunter pursuing a boar and challenged Arjuna to a combat. Finally, the Lord revealed himself and gave the weapon to Arjuna.

The story, also narrated by Bharavi, a Sanskrit poet, in a work which was very popular in ancient and mediaeval India, appears to have made a particular appeal to the Pallava artists. The poet is believed to have lived in Kanchipuram, the Pallava capital. There are innumerable renderings of the story in Hindu art all over the country. There is a particularly fine series of sculptures in the Lepakshi temple, in Andhra Pradesh, which was built in the fourteenth century. An objection to the theory is that the centre of attraction is not the boar hunt, as it should be, but the crevice. The

same story is depicted, but in a less finished state, a little to the south on the same face of the hill.

Some scholars believe that this sculpture tells the story of Bhagiratha's penance, another incident from the epics. Bhagiratha desired to bring down the river Ganges from the heavens to purify the ashes of his ancestors, an indication of the Hindu reverence for the famous river. Only Lord Siva could break the force of the river's precipitous fall on the earth, and so he prayed to the Lord. The ascetic, it is thought, must be Bhagiratha.

The fact that a water course in the cleft played an important part in this drama on stone strengthens this view. It is probable, in the opinion of some scholars, that, in Pallava days, water was let down into the fissure from above on festive occasions.

Considering, however, the enormous popularity of the story of Arjuna's penance in India in Pallava times, it may be assumed that it is this story which has been depicted here.

Understanding its theme is generally necessary to appreciate a work of art, but it is not impossible to admire the art here independently of the subject.

Pallava understanding of animal life, exhibited so sublimely here, is in evidence in a lighter fashion. A little to the north is carved a group of three monkeys, father, mother and child. The mother is picking out lice from the young one's head, a homely touch to find in the graceful art of Mamallapuram. Not far off again is carved on the rock face another group of an elephant, with its cow and calf, a monkey and a peacock. Pallava observation of animal life was close and sympathetic.

In another composition have the Mamallapuram artists depicted a beloved story from the epics. A few yards to the south of "Arjuna's penance" has been rendered in a bas relief which, though not so big as its neighbour, is nevertheless of substantial size, the story of Lord Krishna protecting the good people of Brindaban from the hail and storm

let loose by Indra. He does so by interposing a mountain between them and the heavens.

In after-ages a pillared "mandapa" was built in front of this sculpture. This has marred its effect. Even so, it is a fine pastoral scene, a common sight in Indian villages. The majesty of Lord Krishna's bearing, the simple wonder of the villagers, the natural realism of the cows being milked show the versatility of the Mamallapuram sculptors. Some lion-like animals of foreign appearance have crept into this tableau.

Structural temples

There are three examples of the last group of monuments at Mamallapuram, structural temples. The most striking is the Shore Temple. At the highest point of the hill stands the temple of Olakkanneswara. About half a mile to the north of Mamallapuram there was dug out from the sands less than fifty years ago the Mukunda Nayanar temple.

The Olakkanneswara, near the light-house,

was used as a light-house itself. This has not improved its appearance. Its superstructure is lost. It is conjectured that this tower must have been of the same type as one of the Shore Temples. A few sculptures have survived. One of them, of Lord Dakshinamurti, is particularly striking.

The Mukunda Nayanar temple is rather plain looking. Some of its parts are lost. It has no sculptures.

The Shore Temple is one of the sights of Mamallapuram. Its location is remarkable. It stands on the very margin of the sea. Until a groyne was built to protect it from the waves, the sea lapped its walls. Its sculptures have been badly worn out by the continuous action of wind and sea.

Its dangerous location has prompted the speculation that perhaps when it was built it was not exposed to the sea, and that a tidal wave has submerged many other shrines near-by. This fate did befall Puhar, an old Chola port on the same coast, in early historical

times. The same calamity is also reported to have occurred more recently. This tidal wave, it is belived, enveloped many monuments near the shore in sand. It was out of the sand that not only the Mukunda Nayanar temple but also the western part of the Shore Temple was dug out early in this century.

Hindu temples may face the east or the west. But the cella should be located as nearly at the back of the temple complex as possible. The Shore Temple's location on the coast precluded this. So practically alone of all Hindu temples today the principal cella of the Shore Temple gives directly on to the entrance from the east. Until recently a lamp standard of stone stood almost amongst the waves. All the other prescribed appurtenances of a Hindu temple were necessarily located to the west of the shrine.

Not only this. The temple has two towers, but three shrines. The eastern and the western are dedicated to Lord Siva. The middle one, in which is an image of Lord Vishnu in His recumbent posture, has no tower. It is pro-

bably lost.

There is something like a riot of inscriptions in the western part of the temple, which now presents a bedraggled appearance. They are the cognomens of Narasimhavarman II Rajasimha who built the temple. In beautiful and sonorous Sanskrit they give out his titles This king luxuriated in these titles. About three hundred of these are carved here and his monuments at Kanchipuram.

The Shore Temple was long an object of particular veneration and royal benefaction. On its floor are inscribed two inscriptions of Rajaraja, the mighty and pious Chola king of the eleventh century, who made many gifts.

The sculptures on the walls, though badly affected by the elements, show the same Pallava delicacy and virtuosity. One of them depicts the story of Arjuna's penance in short compass.

The modern tourist might be interested to read of a predecessor of his in about the seventh century A.D. Dandin, a famous San-

skrit poet, then living in Kanchipuram, was invited by Lalitalaya, one of the architects who made Mamallapuram, to inspect a recumbent image of Lord Vishnu a break in a wrist of which he had set right. A Sanskrit work of fiction describes how Dandin and some friends of his, perhaps the earliest tourists to Mamallapuram of whom there is record, came to the port city. They saw a palace on the shore and many other buildings glimmering white. They viewed the image. They could find no trace of the repair. Lalitalaya was gratified at this tribute to his dexterity. The image must have been the one in the middle shrine in the Shore Temple.

Around Mamallapuram :

Except at two shrines, the Adivaraha "cave" temple and the Talasayana Perumal temple, the large structure in the middle of the township, which arose after the Pallavas, Mamallapuram is not a centre of piety today as it was in the olden days. At the height of its splendour, as a Pallava metropolis, it was a city of temples in regular worship, a royal

residence and a leading port of the kingdom. On three sides of it there were other sites of monuments, only less important than its own outstanding examples.

Three miles to the north is Saluvankuppam, where there is a "cave" temple excavated in the reign of Narasimhavarman II and a so-called "Tiger Cave". A little to the north is a Chola temple at Tiruvadandai. Still farther away is the Tirupporur temple some pillars in which carry inscriptions of the reign of the second Narasimhavarman.

To the west, on what was probably the road from the Pallava capital of Kanchi to the Pallava port of Mamallapuram, stands Tirukazhukunram. This site would be better known but for its contiguity to Mamallapuram. On one of the hills here, midway through, the Pallavas excavated a "cave" temple of something like the pattern of the earlier excavations at Mamallapuram. On its pillars some Dutchmen, who had a fort at Sadras, six miles to the south of Mamallapuram, have carved their names. At the bottom of the hill is an ancient

structural temple. It is notable in Tamil epigraphy, for it contains two inscriptions, one of which, by the first Narasimhavarman, called here the captor of Vatapi, confirms a benefaction to the temple by a remote ancestor of his, Skandasishya. The second epigraph, issued by Aditya I, the early imperial Chola of the ninth century A. D., further confirms the grant. The visitor may recapture in its cloisters something of the "feel" of old Hinduism.

On the top of the hill there daily takes place the celebrated incident of eagles, believed to be flying from Benares to Rameswaram every day, fed by a priest at noon. The structural temple nearby belongs to the reign of Narasimhavarman II. The inner and outer walls of its sanctum carry some superb sculptures.

On the way to Kanchi, to the west, from this celebrated site lies Vallam, where three "cave" temples were excavated in Pallava times. Their characteristics are broadly the same as those of the Mamallapuram examples.

Six miles to the south of Mamallapuram, on the coast, are the remains of a Dutch fort at Sadras. This was a stronghold in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Further south, also on the coast, lies the temple of Vayalur, a Pallava handiwork, one of the pillars of which carries an inscription containing the longest royal genealogy in Indian epigraphy.

Near Vayalur is an interesting site now come to prominence. In 1969 explorations conducted by the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology at a place called Vasavasamudram on the banks of a river disclosed traces of an old entrepot. The discoveries included Roman drinking vessels, called amphorae (which have also been discovered at Arikkamedu, near Pondicherry, further down the coast), huge bricks (which have also been found at Puhar, an old Chola port still further south) and drainage pipes made of baked clay.

It is possible that Vasavasamudram was an entrepot connected with the capital, Kanchipuram, through a river, which is now dry. Huen-tsang, the Chinese visitor of the seventh

century A.D., is now shown to have been justified when *he said that Kanchipuram was a port.* He meant it was an inland port.

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